

# Plague

## 1. What is Plague?

Plague in humans is a very rare but serious disease. It's caused by bacteria (germs) that mostly affects wild rodents (e.g. ground squirrels, chipmunks, and rats). Humans and pets can get sick if they visit or live in areas where rodents have just died from plague.

## 2. How common is this disease?

Plague is very rare in humans. It does happen naturally in the western U.S. In California, plague is more common in the foothills and mountains and less likely along the coast. In LA County, wild rodents in rural areas may carry plague germs. In the years between 2005 and 2015, two people in LA County had plague.

## 3. How does this disease spread?

Plague most often spreads when people get bit by an infected flea. Less often, it's spread by direct contact with the infected rodent (e.g. touching their fur or body fluids). Plague very rarely spreads from person-to-person and may only happen when a person or animal breathes in the cough or sneeze droplets of a patient with severe plague pneumonia. Less than one case each year in the U.S. has come from contact with a cat or dog infected by a rodent.

## 4. What are the symptoms of this disease?

Signs can start 1 to 8 days after contact with plague. Most people have fever, headache, chills, body aches, and then get swollen, tender, and painful lymph nodes (bubonic plague). Less often, people have low blood pressure, severe lung and kidney disease (septicemic plague) or cough, difficult breathing, and bloody mucus (pneumonic plague).

## 5. How is this disease diagnosed and treated?

Plague is diagnosed by physical exam if someone has swollen lymph nodes and by lab tests of blood or lymph node fluid. History of being in an area and having close contact with rodents (touching or feeding) supports the diagnosis. Plague is treated with certain antibiotics (medicine that kills bacteria). Sometimes, infected lymph nodes are drained. With treatment, people with plague usually get better.

## 6. How can you prevent getting this disease?

When at home or rural picnic spots, campgrounds, and wilderness areas:

- Never feed or touch squirrels, chipmunks, or other wild rodents.
- Don't walk, hike, or camp near rodent burrows.
- Wear pants tucked into socks or boots. Spray insect repellent with DEET on socks and pant cuffs.
- Use flea control products on your pets.
- Get rid of places where rodents and stray animals sleep, hide, or find food. Remove brush or piles of rock, trash, and firewood. Keep pet food in rodent-proof containers.
- Report sick or dead rodents to the park ranger or local [Environmental Health Vector Management](#) program.



### Key Points:

- Plague is a very rare but serious disease in humans. It most often spreads when people get bit by an infected flea. Less often, people get sick from touching infected wild rodents. It's very rare to get through a sick person or animal's cough or sneeze droplets.
- Common signs of plague include high fever and swollen, tender, and painful lymph nodes in the neck, armpit or groin.
- Certain antibiotics can treat this disease.

### For more information:

Los Angeles County,  
Department of Public Health  
<http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/hea/library/topics/plague/>

California Department of  
Public Health  
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/HEALTHINFO/DISCOND/Pages/Plague.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control  
and Prevention (CDC)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/plague/faq/>

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